

## BOOK REVIEW

WILLIAM B. OBER: *Bottoms Up! A Pathologist's Essays on Medicine and the Humanities*. Carbondale and Edwardsville, Ill., Southern Illinois University Press, 1987. pp. xix, 335, \$19.95.

BEING familiar with his previous book, *Boswell's Clap*, I immediately perked up when I saw Ober's name on the new dust jacket. All my expectations were realized, for style and substance, long the hallmarks of his writings, are powerfully displayed in *Bottoms Up!*

*Bottom's Up!* is a collection of captivating essays on an array of subjects from flagellation (the title piece) to the iconography of leprosy to the bestial custom of placentophagy. In an essay on infertility in the Bible, Ober presents a novel interpretation of the death of Onan who, contrary to levirate law, spilled his seed rather than fertilize his deceased brother's wife Tamar. Ober reasons that death resulted from a coronary event, not God's wrath. Was Onan's sin masturbation or *coitus interruptus*? Most likely neither. Onan's actions were not deliberate. Instead, sudden death intervened at the moment of climax, and ejaculation occurred just as his penis slipped out during his last gasp.

Several articles have a psychopathological motif. The most bizarre case involved the 18th-century Bohemian composer František Koczwara, who asphyxiated himself trying to induce sexual excitation by hanging. Ober dispels the belief that a man with a noose around his neck and about to be "jerked into eternity" can have an orgasm. The presence of semen stains in the clothing of hanged criminals reflects the passive emptying of the seminal vesicles following dislocation of the cervical vertebrae. A fascinating discussion of this complex psychosexual disorder ends with an irreverent couplet from Hugh Kingsmill:

But bacon's not the only thing

That's cured by hanging from a string.

As a pathologist and practicing medical examiner, the author has spent much of his career as a "witness to *peccata mundi* and their consequences." He understands better than most that "in this world there is more psychopathology than anatomic pathology."

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A delightful interlude is provided by a previously unpublished essay that chronicles the illustrated editions of John Cleland's novel *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*. While no particular illustrator is so closely associated with Cleland as, for example, Cruikshank is with Dickens or Tenniel with Carroll, several well-known artists sketched erotic scenes for 16 of the 50 editions of *Fanny Hill*. These images, like all erotic art, are "representations of lovemaking which seem to have no hidden meaning or purpose, but simply to depict an enjoyable activity in a straightforward manner."

More than 100 illustrations embellish the text, each one meticulously selected by our peripatetic author during his travels to numerous museums and libraries around the world. Particularly dramatic are Phillipe Mohlitz's etching *Le pendu*, and a 14th-century English illustration of a leper begging alms.

Still performing his duties at the autopsy table at the age of 68, Ober continues to "unravel questions in the humanities at night." He has already begun writing essays on Mozart's death and aphrodisiacs that hopefully will be collected in a future volume.

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